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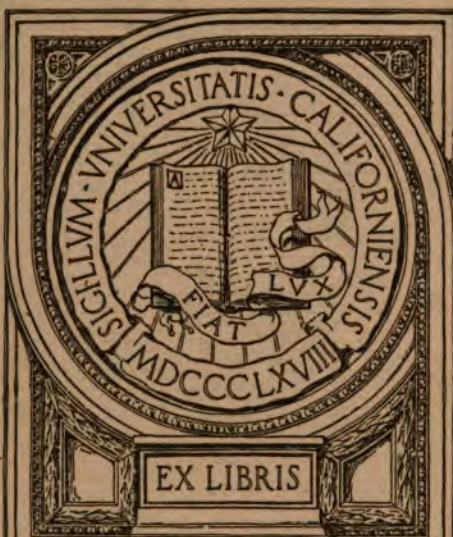
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The
Classical Association of Virginia

A Plea for Greek in the American High School

By

THOMAS FITZHUGH

President of the Association

University of Virginia

1914

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A Plea for Greek in the American High School.*

The Classical Association of Virginia craves the privilege of commending to the authorities of our public high schools the ideal and compelling claims of Greek for generous recognition and practical provision in the curriculum of secondary instruction. A great historian has recently pointed out, that our higher culture is rooted in the soil of antiquity, having sprung out of the great creations with which the Greek race at the high water mark of its development endowed the world, and that therefore we cannot give up our connection with Greek, but must continually go back to it afresh, in order to assimilate more fully its life-giving elements, and build further upon its historical foundation.†

Because of this basal relation of Greek to human culture, the nations of earth have paid their tribute of honor to these glorious creators of cultural values, and provided chairs of Greek in all the great universities of the world. We too in America have unhesitatingly maintained the Greek ideal in our universities. All that is now needed is to render our Greek departments in the universities fully effective by providing the necessary Greek preparation in the high school. By thus encouraging Greek in the high school, we shall not only strengthen the Greek department in the university, but stimulate and elevate the Latin instruction in the high school. For it will at once become clear to everybody, as it has always been to scholars, that the study of Greek is of all things the most helpful and illuminating to the Latin teacher himself.

*Reprinted from *The Virginia Journal of Education*, January, 1914.

†Eduard Meyer, *Thukydides und die Entstehung der wissenschaftlichen Geschichtsschreibung*, Wien und Leipzig, 1913.

We beg therefore to urge upon all who are interested in the work of the high school the fundamental cultural and economic importance of providing the usual two final years of Greek instruction in the high school, so as not only to make it possible for every pupil, who so desires, to acquire the precious elements of Greek as far as the reading of Homer, and that too entirely regardless of whether he will go on to the university or not, but also as a matter of educational efficiency and business economy, in order to make fully effective the Greek equipment of the university, which depends organically upon the high schools for the preparation and supply of its student material.

Greek is the one ideal element needed to round out and perfect our system of democratic education. Its call is a spiritual one. The maintenance of Greek in the high school is our tribute of loyalty to the spiritual ancestry of our culture. The time is come, when we too of Virginia and the South can afford to pay such reverence to the ideal interests of life. Our public school system can never be fully worthy of an enlightened democracy, until we shall have made it possible for any number of pupils, however small, to pursue the study of Greek during the last two years of the high school course. For nothing is more certain than that, in the profoundest essentials of our thought and speech, X Greek furnishes the one indispensable supplement to Latin,—a supplement so important, and covering such vital cultural phases of thought and vocabulary, that to omit it from our high school curriculum cannot but mean a serious spiritual and practical lacuna in our educational system. And the very reasons, why in the providence of human history Greek has become thus fundamental to our higher thought and speech, and therefore most precious and necessary for a generous culture, cannot fail to determine the *noblesse oblige* of our attitude to the question of providing such instruction in our public high schools, and thus encouraging both the study and the teaching of Greek in our great democracy.

What then are these compelling reasons, that make Greek essential to a sound education, and that challenge our loyalty to its maintenance in the high school? Why is it that the very most critical part of our thinking, and of all cultured thought and speech, is Greek, and therefore only to be truly known and under-

stood by one who has acquired the key in the elements of Greek instruction?

The comprehensive answer to these vital questions is that the Greek spirit is the fountain-head of the higher culture of mankind. The gift of Greece to the Indoeuropean world is a possession for eternity. In order to satisfy ourselves of the supreme value of the Greek contribution to our higher spiritual life, we need only to pass in review the several grand phases of that life, in society and government, in religion and art, in literature, philosophy, and the separate sciences. In every spiritual field, the Greeks were either the original creators or the original mediators of all those cultural inheritances, which make up the dignity and worth of civilized existence today. Without the work of the Greek spirit, our religion and democracy, our art and literature, our philosophy and science, would be unthinkable and impossible.

It was doubtless of profounder religious and historical significance than the historian of antiquity will ever be able to set forth in detail, and Christendom can never forget, that several hundred years before the birth of Christ the Jewish world was completely hellenized, and the Old Testament translated into Greek by the scholars of Alexandria. In this way, the religious thought of the Hebrews was blended with that of the Greeks, and assimilated to Indoeuropean consciousness, thus furnishing the historical preparation for the spread of Christianity to the Græco-Roman, Keltic, Germanic, and Slavonic peoples.

But if the Old Testament Scriptures were first communicated to our Indoeuropean world in a Greek translation, with what utter loyalty should we cherish the recollection, that the New Testament was actually first published to the world in the Greek original! No wonder therefore, that the most precious coinage of our thought and speech is stamped with the Greek image and superscription.

Not only was the spirit of Hellas the medium through which Hebrew monotheism and Christianity were first assimilated to Indoeuropean thought, and so communicated to the nations of earth, but human liberty and cultured democracy were first born into the world and illustrated for man under the violet-crowned brow of the Athenian Acropolis.

And not alone our Indoeuropean ideals of society and govern-

ment, but our standards of beauty and truth were born in the souls of the Greeks, and first found expression at their hands.

✓ The great arts, literatures, philosophies, and sciences of the Western World were modelled in the workshop of Greece.

✓ It was the Greeks who first taught the world what was beautiful in architecture, sculpture, and painting, and all subsequent artists have cherished and imitated the transcendent forms of beauty which Greek artists have left us. The mere memory—all we have—of the Olympian Zeus and the Athene Parthenos of Phidias is a spiritual benediction.

✓ The Greeks were the originators of every noble type of literature known among men, and the masterpieces which they achieved in prose and poetry seem destined never to be surpassed. ✓ Homer is still the central sun in the solar system of human letters. So too our philosophy and science owe their birth to the ✓ Greek mind. Thales of Miletus and Democritus of Abdera, Socrates of Athens and Aristotle of Stagira, first pointed the way of knowledge to mankind.

These are the tremendous facts, which account for the critical importance of the Greek element in the alchemy of our thought and in the structure of our speech, these the spiritual values, which merit of us a lasting memorial to Greek in our public school system. Let us not only endow it in our universities, let us also support and encourage it in our high schools. It is our noblest heritage from the past, and no cultured Indoeuropean democracy can afford to omit it as a possible subject of study in the high school, it matters not how few may elect to pursue it.

The Classical Association of Virginia therefore earnestly recommends the provision of two final years of Greek instruction in the high school, in addition to the regular provision for high school Latin.

Thanksgiving, 1913.

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